DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 408 CS 216 564

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TITLE Black English Speakers: An Examination of Language Registers of High and Low Achieving Black Elementary School Students.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 38p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; *Black Students; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *High Achievement; Language Arts; Language Research; Language Styles; *Low Achievement; *North American English; Social Dialects
IDENTIFIERS Black Communication

ABSTRACT

A study examined the personal linguistic range of registers held by low socioeconomic black students to see if they differed from those of middle income children and to what degree this correlated to school achievement. The study used a modified version of both analytic induction and constant comparison. Subjects attended a Title 1 magnet school in a school district in the southwestern part of the United States located on the periphery of an inner city community. Participants were 8 fifth grade black students (4 boys and 4 girls) from 3 different classrooms in the school; 4 of the 8 were high achievers and 4 were low academic achievers; 4 were from lower income families and 4 were from middle income families. Results indicated that, on average, the 4 high achieving black students tended to use a language register that resembled mainstream English. Findings suggest that exposure to language influences the range of a student's register and that success in school may be related to the close approximation of the student's language to the language of the classroom and textbooks used. (Contains 150 references and 2 tables of data.) (CR)

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ED 426 408

BLACK ENGLISH SPEAKERS: AN EXAMINATION OF LANGUAGE REGISTERS OF HIGH AND LOW ACHIEVING BLACK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

"O-h-h! I jes' hit it. Go out on da hit ball. Ooh-h! He cu'da made dat. Dat wuzz interference. Dat'ud been baaad if I'ud made it, huh?"

The speaker who made this statement is a low achieving black fifth grader from a single-parent home in the inner city. He is playing with his classmates in a game called, "four-square", on a school playground, during recess. He is interacting socially with his friends who all seem to understand and accept his language. His language is a dimension of black English which has been widely discussed in the literature, since the 1960s (Abraham, 1970; Barnitz, 1972; Dillard, 1972; Goodman, 1965; Hall, 1966; Labov, 1972; Roberts, 1976; Taylor, 1969; Wolfram, 1979). There is little empirical research which investigates this very personal communication as a possible linguistic register used by black English speakers and what if any effect it has on learning.

A second statement made by a fifth grade high academic achieving black girl from a professional family who is explaining to a

small group of her black peers how she would teach her favorite game to a younger sister illustrates noticeable differences in the registers although both students speak black English.

> The game is "Speed". It's a card game and my li'l sister wanted to know how to play. The reason it's called "Speed" is cuz you haf' to go FAST--. It's like you- it's like you ken put Ace, Queen, King,- it's like you play poker, but it's not. It's like you ken go backwards or frontwards. If you have a five you ken thro' a four or a six.===

When observing these two linguistic interactions, one wonders if both speakers have the same linguistic range but consciously adapted their selection of words and syntax because they knew what their listeners could comprehend. If so, this is exactly what fluent speakers of language do as they communicate. They select from their linguistic register range to effectively communicate. Realizing this one can conclude that the wider the speaker's range the wider his or her opportunity for successful communication. If on the other hand a speaker has a limited range he or she has inherent restrictions on communication possibilities. Obviously, there is a need to delve into critical inquiry surrounding this topic.

Like all languages, black English varies from speaker to speaker. For example, Smitherman (1977, 1994) suggested an inner compulsion by some blacks to use black speech even when there is no compelling sociai pressure to do so, and Baugh (1983) stated that blacks tend to use black English in a social situation if they have had little exposure to a different social language. Shaklee (1980) discussed the different registers a speaker may use based on the region, social class, and the "intimacy" (p. 34) of the situation. Abraham (1970) reported that children tend to use the same register as those immediately older than themselves in a social group. Dillard (1972), Labov (1972), Smitherman (1992) and Wyatt, 1995) defined forms, features, and styles (see also Flores, Cousin, & Diaz, 1991; Hayes, 1991; Lee, 1994; Seymour,1987; Woodson, 1990) that validated personal communication used by black English speakers.

Ghadessy in 1988 indicated that social language is a relationship between speakers and if communication occurs, that relationship is complete. Unfortunately, when the language register that the black students bring from home is different from the register used in classrooms at school and both students and teachers are unaware of the significance of these differences, communication

problems can occur and may lead to school failures (Cummins, 1981; Delpit, 1995; Shade, 1989). It therefore seems reasonable that black children's range of communication possibilities and the factors that affect these should be given more attention if we are to understand their potential for successful communication interactions.

An assumption is that black English vernacular is a register spoken exclusively by lower class people and is a substandard form of what is called standard English (Champion & Bloome, 1995; Cullinan, 1974; Riney, 1990; Stoller, 1975; Wolfram, 1979). It may be the only language register spoken by low socioeconomic status children and one of many spoken by middle and upper classes allowing them choices of communication and the freedom to select from among them.

Because it is still not valued as a language, the political, social and cultural forces that shape policy may preclude giving black English the attention it deserves (Baugh, 1995). Such attention may help educators gain the greatly needed insights about school performance of black children (Baugh, 1995; DeStefano, 1972; Gilbert, 1991; Lawton, 1968; Washington & Craig, 1994).

There is evidence that many black students speak black English which is viewed as their primary language (McCullough; 1981; Roberts; 1976; Turner; 1949; Taylor, 1969; Yeltin, 1980) and mainstream (school) English as a second language. Some black English speakers may consciously or unconsciously use different registers of black English. The concern may not be the variance within this segment of their register range but more importantly if this is the only segment of their range.

Taylor (1969) and Lee (1995) suggested that a number of blacks may consciously deny using any form of black English because of the negative terms associated with blackness. When this occurs we know the speaker has made a choice from within their range. This is similar to choices made by all successful speakers who select from within their register. The concern of educators must be for children who do not have a wide enough range to function in the many communication situations they will encounter outside their home territory.

Recently, this topic received much attention in the media when the Oakland Unified School District decided to adopt a resolution recognizing black English, or "Ebonics" as an official language. These

media reports sent a representative group of educators, politicians, and even black English speakers scurrying to discount this language as anything other than a deficient way of talking (Berkley; 1996; Brown, 1997; Harris, 1996; Moore, 1996; Ross, 1997; Walker, 1996). In addition, black English speakers with a narrow register range were admonished for not learning the "standard" way of speaking(see also Burns, 1996; Pyle, 1997; Steele, 1997).

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

As previously discussed many, if not all, blacks are able to speak some form of black English (Lee, 1995; Roberts, 1976; Taylor, 1991). They use different ranges of language registers just as speakers of other languages (Ghadessy,1988; Lemke, 1995; Rogers, 1976). This means that talk used at work may be different from talk used at play or classroom talk may be different from playground talk. Studies by Labov (1972) and Steward (1971) indicated that speech used by black children outside of school was quite different from what was expected in school and E. Schneider (1989) discussed the social component of black speech because non-mainstream registers are associated with the socioeconomically lower class of the

black population (see also Wolfram, 1969). Baugh (1983) and Smitherman (1992) presented somewhat different views as they maintained the historical and cultural underpinnings of language registers. It appears that black English, along with the ranges of registers used by its speakers, has become a target for controversy. There is also a belief that it may be related to academic achievement (Cummins, 1979; Delpit, 1995; Hayes, 1991; Shade, 1986; Tate & Edwards;1992). Therefore, it seems worthwhile to examine the language spoken by high and low academically achieving black students to see if and how it affects their school performance.

This study investigated the personal range of registers held by low socioeconomic black students to see if they differed from those of middle income children and to what degree this correlated to school achievement.

The parameters of language development for blacks are structured and systematic, but different from mainstream language registers. Gorrell (1995), Malmstrom (1973), Poplack and Tagliamonte (1994), Schlesinger (1982), and Wyatt (1995) were intrigued with the common, but different, structures in phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, lexicon, and pragmatics of black

English. They were interested in how black students from various social, economic, political and educational groups used these structures. An unwritten language believed by some (Baugh, 1983; Donahue, 1980; Smitherman, 1977; Taylor, 1969) to have roots in central and western Africa, pidginized and creolized, black English transmits historical, social, and symbolic values of black people. Dillard (1972), Holloway and Voss (1993) and Schneider (1973), suggested that today's black English still carries traces of its African history. The following are examples of phonological and syntactical characteristics of black English according to Bartel, Grill & Grill (1993).

Phonological Characteristics	Examples
-merging of "f" with "th"	birfday for birthday
-r-lessness	Cal for Carol
-simplification of consonant clusters	
st	pass for past
ft	leff for left
nt	wen for went
Syntactical Characteristics	**Examples**
-subject expression	John live instead of

John lives

-verb agreement

He be running
instead of
He's running

-negation

I don't got none
instead of
I don't have any

Smitherman (1977) discussed examples of semantic characteristics of the African American language that carried more than word meanings but implications, values, history and consequences that could only be decoded within the system.

Semantic Characteristics	Examples
-Linguistic reversals	bad for good That cat be a baaad tether ball player. meaning That boy is a good tether ball player.
-Religious linguistics	Lord, ham mercy on me! meaning

	Lord, have mercy on me!
-Music world semantics	He gittin' down!
	meaning
	He's doing a good job.

As was evidenced by a strong base of these language characteristics, research suggests that black language is more than a vernacular or dialect (Baugh, 1983); Dandy, 1991; Fillmore, 1986; Hilliard, 1980; Lemoine, 1992; Moore, 1996; Smitherman, 1977; Taylor, 1969). Black English vernacular (BEV) is a way of speaking, but black language is a systematic, rule-governed language used by many native black people in this country.

Yet, questions related to the status of this language remain. The specific research questions for this study were:

1. Do high academically achieving black students tend to use a wider range of language registers or a register that more closely resembles mainstream English than low academically achieving black students?

2. How are language registers of high and low academically achieving black students affected by socioeconomic factors?

Rationale

Language registers are used by successful people as they move from one communication situation to another. Yet, little research has been reported related to language registers of high and low academically achieving black students. Is the degree of one's choice and opportunity related to this register range? Since many black students still fall far below other groups in academic achievement, this study was significant because it examined the range of registers of black students to determine if the more academically successful black students used registers that most resembled mainstream English and if the range of registers was correlated with socioecomomic levels. This study provided data that researchers and educators can use for program planning to improve the academic achievement of black students.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and quantitative inquiry provided meaningfulness and insight to the study. The design used was a modified version of both analytic induction and constant comparison described by Patton

(1992, pp. 69-75). Specific research questions were analyzed and case studies profiled participants for descriptive comparisons.

In-depth data collected from a small number of black students were valuable in providing an understanding of language registers used for communicating in different situations. School documents, audiotapes, videotapes, fieldnotes from various observations and conversations with students were thoroughly reviewed. Triangulating with collected data enhanced reliability (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). A consistent and well-planned schedule enhanced continuity. Transcriptions from audiotapes were coded after careful attention was given to intonation. They were then presented in traditional orthography with spelling approximating the speech of the students as much as possible. Transcriptions were also quantified using an adaptation of the mean length of utterances (MLU), described by Myers in 1987, to determine the degree to which black English was used by the participants.

School Setting

The setting for this study was a magnet school within a school district in the southwestern part of the United States. The school was located on the periphery of an inner city community and was

classified as a Title I school because 64 percent of its students received free lunches. The school population of 800 consisted of both resident and non-resident students of diverse backgrounds. Thirty-four percent of the students were white mainstream American English speakers. Black students made up 32 percent of the population and observations revealed that the majority of these students spoke some form of black English as their first language. The rest of the students represented several ethnic groups who spoke "official" home languages other than English; Latino and Vietnamese students held the greatest representation in these groups.

Participants

The participants in the study were eight fifth grade black students from three different classrooms in the school. The subjects, four boys, four girls, four of whom were high, and four of whom were low academic achievers of each sex, were selected from teacher-generated classroom lists. Of the eight students, four were selected from middle income families and four from low income families; there were no high income families enrolled at the school.

Procedures

During the early stages of data collection, an initial framework was developed that included guidelines and timelines. The literature was again reviewed to assist with a focus for data collection. Next, weekly meetings were at first scheduled with two coders who were trained to collect and analyze descriptive data. Later, as data collection began, the meetings were held biweekly.

Training.

Two coders (assistants) agreed to assist with collecting and coding data. One coder was a white male college student who was retired from the Navy. The second coder was a white female who had recently completed law school and was waiting for bar results. In addition, a black parent of one student agreed to participate by reading and discussing a story. Coders had no prior experience in working with students who spoke black English and therefore needed to be trained.

Training consisted of reviewing the focus of the study and designing a schedule of how audio and videotaping would occur and be transcribed. Transcripts from a 1995 study completed by this researcher and excerpts from books (Dillard, 1972; Smitherman,

1977) which illustrated examples of black English were used for coder training. The coders noted such phonological characteristics as those indicated by the merging "f" with "th", and the oversimplification of consonant clusters (Bartel, Grill and Grill, 1993). Smitherman's (1977) description of syntactical and semantic characteristics of black English where the subjects used zero copula or negation were discussed and coded. Contrastive analysis was used to show coders phonological, syntactical, and semantic similarities and differences between black and mainstream English. Voice recognition tapes of recorded television personalities and live black voices of people from all socioeconomic levels, completed by this researcher in 1997, were also used to assist the coders in identifying different ranges of language registers in black and non-black English speakers.

The process used in each situation was systematic. As coders looked at patterns that emerged from the data they discussed coded information and how the framework could be adapted to accommodate new information. Weekly or biweekly discussions ensured interrater reliability.

A three-ring binder was used to hold collected data for the study. A journal, with a section labeled for each participant was carried by the researcher into classrooms, on the playground, and into other situations where the participants were engaged in conversation. Information was also collected on fourteen audiotapes and two videotapes.

The coding system used was an adaptation from both Goodwin (1990) and Heath (1983). Language samples were transcribed and modified to follow a format described by Myers (1987).

Analyzing transcribed data was difficult because black English does not have a formal written form and no standardized instruments could be found in the literature to assess black English.

Finally, to ensure interesting and easy reading of the profiles, a black secondary English teacher was employed to organize, read, and edit all student profiles.

Language data were collected as participants engaged in four situations.

Situation I- Parent and Children: Response To Literature.

The activity in the first situation involved the reading by a parent of the story, Flossie and the Fox, by Patricia McKissack (1986).

This story was chosen because of the excellent and subtle way black English was featured and because the researcher believed the text and illustrations would provide a comfort level that would encourage conversation. The entire situation was audiotaped. The parent read the story and then used "response to literature" questions similar in format to ones encouraged for use by teachers as they collect information for student portfolios.

Situation II- Child to Child: Giving Directions to Peers.

The intent of the second session was to have students give directions to their friends on how to play their favorite game in order to capture their language as they talked at length about a topic they knew.

Situation III- Child to Child: Playing with Friends.

The plan and schedule included a ten minute observation of each child involved in play with self-selected friends. The playground registers were important because there would be no directions from the researcher or assistants that would inhibit informal conversations with peers.

This situation became the most difficult. Patton, in 1990, said that "people may behave quite differently when they know they are

being observed compared with how they would behave if they were not aware of being observed" (p.209). This was a true statement for the playground situation.

Situation IV- Teacher and Children: Talking in the Classroom.

During situation four, each student was observed as formal participation in classroom discussions occurred with the teacher directing the conversation. Observation notes were taken and the lessons were audiotaped. The intent of this situation was to discover the language registers used by students in the formal setting of a classroom.

Data Analysis

The design of this study required a "sensitive observer of the subtleties of everyday life" (Van Manen, p. 29) to answer the research questions posed about the language registers used in different situations by eight high and low achieving black students from different socioeconomic groups. A process for profiling the students was developed according to a scheme presented by Patton (1990). Student information was collected and assembled as previously stated. Data about each student were organized in individual folders. A descriptive narrative was written from the data

that provided highlights of each subject and a frame for analyzing the findings.

Language registers for each situation were analyzed inductively by carefully examining the phonology, syntax, and semantics of each participant, using a modified version of running records (Integrated Learning Workshops, 1996), for each child. When a phonological substitution, such as, "d" was used for "th", a circle was drawn around the word and the mainstream version of the word was written above it. When a phonological omission was made as when the "d" was omitted from "and", a line was drawn through the area of the missing letter. When there was a difference in syntax as in the noun/verb agreement, "it go" instead of "it goes", a frame was drawn around the word or phrase.

Other notation symbols were also used for counting instances of black English in transcriptions. Subcategories were marked under each area as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

Dimensions of Language and Meanings Coded by Categories and Subcategories

Dimensions of Language	Meaning of Categories And Subcategories
Phonology	Beginning, Medial, Ending Sounds
Substitution	Examples: "d" for "th"
	"u" for "a"
	" f" for "th"
Omission	"'ont" for "don't"
	"goin'" for "going"
Insertion	"fair-skin-ded" for "fair-skinned"
Syntax	Grammar
Noun/Verb	Examples: He throw
Zero Copula	He be walking
Negation	I don't want no
Semantics	Word Meaning/Vocabulary
Vocabulary	Examples: Her hair "jacked up"
Word Insertion	He like said

Further, language samples were quantified by using a modified system presented by Myers (1987) and Integrated Learning Workshops (1996) called the mean length of utterances (MLU) as illustrated in Table 2. In calculating the MLU the total number of utterances were counted then divided by the total number of phonological, syntactical or semantic forms of black English, as defined in this paper, that each student used in each situation. Table 2 also shows the formula used for calculating the percentage of the language that was considered mainstream English. For example, 1:200 indicates that the student used only one black English word out of the 200 words spoken. Therefore the student spoke mainstream English 99.5 percent of the time.

Table 2

Black/Mainstream Language Utterances Used by Black Fifth Grade Students

B/T	Percentage	
1:200	99.5	**Legend:**
1:100	99	ME=Mainstream English
1:50	98	BE=Black English
1:25	96	T=Total Utterance
1:10	90	Percentage=Percentage
1:5	80	of Talk in ME
1:2	50	**Formula:**
		100-(B/T x 100)

Note: B/T=The number of black English utterances out of the total number of utterances. A percentage of 50 indicates that one out of every two utterances was black English, meaning the students spoke black English 50 percent of the time.

Statements that each student made in classroom situations, on the playground and in discussion groups were reviewed for recurring and frequency of language patterns. Internal homogeneity relied on categories that belonged together. External heterogeneity depended on differences among the comments by each student.

FINDINGS

An examination of the data revealed that three of the high achievers used a register that most resembled mainstream English and they were from middle socioeconomic families. The highest achiever used only mainstream English and spoke no black English in any of the situations investigated. Although three less successful students tended to use more black English than did the high achievers, they spoke mainstream English as well. These were also students who were from low socioeconomic families. One low achieving student from a middle income family used more black English utterances while one high achieving student from a low income family tended to use more mainstream English utterances. On the average, the four high achieving black fifth grade students tended to use a language register that resembled mainstream English. Findings also indicated that one's exposure to language influences the range of one's register and that success in school may be related to the close approximation of one's language to the language of the classroom and textbooks used in the classroom.

Implications

Results from this investigation indicated that both groups of black students used a limited language register. This was consistent with Baugh's (1983) views that language performance could be based on early exposure and experiences outside of school.

Other concerns emerged as a result of this study that may have long reaching implications for educators. For example, many schools do not offer programs that include strategies and techniques for black students whose range of registers does not include school English. As was evidenced by this study, the belief that black students are native to this country and their experiences and language exposures in the mainstream are sufficient enough for them to be successful in school may not be an accurate perception. Therefore, literacy programs must be carefully examined to ensure that contents include strategies that meet the needs of black English speakers. Mainstream teachers required to teach selected programs must be knowledgeable about how mainstream programs can be modified for black learners.

The denial of black English use emerged as another concern in this study. It was also noticed by Taylor in 1969 and Lee in 1995. It

was evident from the present study that black students were aware of language differences. Informal conversations with two students showed that they were able to recognize differences in the spoken and written language of others but were not able or willing to recognize or make adaptations to their own language. Although one child in the study used mainstream English in all except the playground situation, when he switched to black English, he was not aware of the switch. While this study offers significant insights, more studies are needed in this area to understand whether one's increasing awareness and attitude about language can increase one's school success. Therefore, additional studies that focus on the language of both successful and unsuccessful black students, along with other factors that influence learning, must continue in the future.

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